

Responding to Nisqually

Historic Seattle's Role After the Earthquake

On February 28, 2001, a 6.8 magnitude earthquake hit western Washington. Months later, the preservation community is still feeling the impact.

Although most of the city's older buildings fared remarkably well, especially those with seismic retrofits, a number of unreinforced masonry buildings in south downtown suffered significant damage. Concentrations of brick buildings in historic Pioneer Square, the Chinatown-International District, and a warehouse district known locally as SODO were hardest hit due to their location on a liquefaction zone.

Half a year later (September 2001), damage estimates are still somewhat speculative and, in many cases, more damage has come to light than initially reported. Mayor Paul Schell's request to

the President for a \$57 million recovery grant was only partially answered with relief for transportation improvements, but none for damaged historic buildings. Some property owners are still waiting for checks from the Small Business Administration (SBA). The city's Office of Housing has developed a program, with funding from Fannie Mae, that will facilitate the rehabilitation of historic residential hotels in Chinatown. The South Downtown Foundation, in conjunction with Community Capital Development, a nonprofit community and economic development organization, has developed a program to aid businesses and housing projects with significant earthquake losses. In Seattle, those with an interest in historic buildings, including business and property owners, preservationists, and city officials are hoping to see more aid come as the rising need becomes clearer.

Historic Seattle's Response

The wide range of preservation needs rising from the earthquake could not be met by one agency alone. As Seattle's only nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of the city's architectural heritage, Historic Seattle played a key role in the city's earthquake response as a preservation advocate and press contact, information and contractor resource, and eventually a funding source for quake-damaged historic properties. For weeks after the disaster, City of Seattle and King County preservation office staff worked long hours to aid individual landmark property owners in understanding the barrage of reports, damage tags, and potential assistance packages.

Most initial media attention focused on severely damaged buildings and public safety concerns rather than retrofit successes or preservation issues. Many preservation proponents feared the premature demolition of weakened historic buildings. Historic Seattle promoted two primary points during the first month after the quake when public interest was still high—"don't rush to tear down damaged historic buildings" and "older buildings are safe." With few excep-

Cadillac Hotel, Seattle, Washington, March 1, 2001. The Cadillac Hotel is the most controversial building damaged in the Nisqually earthquake. Photo by the author.



tions, property owners of historic buildings have not prematurely taken down unstable buildings or parapets. The mild hysteria surrounding falling bricks in the affected historic districts abated soon after the quake.

Funding for Damaged Historic Buildings

Coordination was important for both immediate and long-term earthquake response for a number of reasons, including fundraising around the disaster. Of all the issues raised by the quake, funding for historic preservation has emerged as one of the most important. Many property owners and potential funders believed the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the SBA would provide low interest loans that would cover damage, but these programs do not fund what are considered “cosmetic fixes” like rebuilding historic cornices or repairing decorative terracotta tiles. The programs were sold to the public as primary funding solutions, but their usefulness to historic building owners suffering a variety of damages was mixed. Funding gaps were common.

Financing architectural and engineering plans, retrofits, and repairs was a primary concern, and will continue to be for months to come. Within the first 10 days of the quake, Historic Seattle committed \$250,000 from its Save the Buildings Fund toward earthquake response, with the hope of stimulating preservation action and leveraging more funding from local foundations and public agencies. To date, Historic Seattle’s pledge has been the largest local commitment.

Working with the City of Seattle’s Office of Economic Development, the city’s Department of Neighborhoods that houses the City of Seattle’s preservation office, and a nonprofit capitol development agency, Historic Seattle helped craft a public funding program for property owners of historic buildings. Conceived as a financial and technical assistance team, the fund has been used primarily to pay for loan officers who have helped property owners understand and package various loan programs, and as a pool for reimbursing owners for architectural and engineering services up to \$10,000 for each project.

Historic Seattle reserved a pool of \$145,000 from its initial pledge for actual repair work and “special cases.” Historic religious buildings, like the Seattle Hebrew Academy, with needs that exceed the loan caps allowable by the SBA, have had trouble meeting their rehabilitation budgets

and will require grants from private benefactors. For special case buildings such as these, Historic Seattle hopes to leverage funding with seed money for repairs and retrofits.

The immediate problem of funding quake repairs will hopefully lead to more public discussion of funding for historic preservation through greater use of existing incentives, more low interest loan programs, and private funding for preservation activities stimulated by community outreach after the quake. Historic Seattle is now planning an economic analysis of historic preservation’s impact on business in downtown Seattle that should facilitate even greater understanding of the relationship between funding nuts-and-bolts preservation and maintaining a critical element of economic development.

Community Outreach

While Historic Seattle’s pledge of \$250,000 received more press attention, the organization’s role as a community resource and advocate arguably had much greater immediate impact. For the majority of property owners affected by the quake, a list of reputable contractors with experience repairing historic buildings was invaluable. Currently, there is no preservation specialists directory, but due to demand following the quake, Historic Seattle posted contractor information on our web site which will serve as the first entries of a contractor database.

During the first few weeks after the quake, contact with preservation organizations in California and the western office of the National Trust also provided well-needed moral support. These organizations provided models for editorials, ideal earthquake response checklists, and model unreinforced masonry building ordinances designed to counteract potential ordinance revisions that would negatively affect historic brick buildings. This invaluable organizational support underscored the need for proactive communication between preservation organizations, especially those on the West Coast who are perpetually “between earthquakes.”

Developing a mutually-beneficial relationship with the local press was another outgrowth of the earthquake we hope to nurture in the future. Initially, Historic Seattle contracted with a local public relations firm to make press contact, but soon members of the press were calling our organization directly with questions about non-earthquake related topics. Providing compelling historical, technical, and theoretical quotes for

earthquake articles encouraged trust between Historic Seattle and local reporters covering building and development news.

A Report Card for Seattle

Because the impact of the earthquake was relatively minor, that is, resulting in no fatalities and, as of today, no loss of significant historic buildings, the natural disaster may have aided preservation in Seattle. The quake provided an opportunity for preservation to be of immediate interest to the general public. It tested the effectiveness of the local preservation community, and showed us where we need improvement. The lessons will undoubtedly be many, but it will probably take years to understand how much we learned from the experience.

Historic Seattle has continued to follow the long-term impact of the quake and is stepping up its advocacy efforts. This year, Historic Seattle hired a preservation advocate to monitor development activity, facilitate grass roots activism, create an online advocacy newsletter, and exchange ideas and information with local government. Nisqually confirmed Historic Seattle's

decision to fund advocacy efforts as an integral but discrete function of this organization.

Today, only one lesson seems clear. The local preservation community can only be effective if it establishes an ongoing, generally positive, and mutually-beneficial relationship with the community at large, including policy makers, any city agency governing buildings and land use, grass roots organizations, the press, allied organizations and other preservationists. Had a strong network predated the quake, it would have been much easier to share information, quickly understand the scope of the impact, and conceive effective response strategies. This network would significantly aid mitigation for future preservation disasters, be they natural or man made.

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Michael Sean Sullivan

The Nisqually Earthquake

At 10:54 a.m. on February 28, 2001, there was a shift in the Juan de Fuca Plate 10 miles northeast of the state capital of Olympia and 40 miles beneath southern Puget Sound. During the next 45 seconds a powerful seismic event of magnitude 6.8 carried most of the population of Washington State through the remarkable experience of a major earthquake.

Once the shock of the earthquake subsided, most people who experienced it believed they had been a part of history in the making. Initially, however, while there was obvious damage to a number of significant properties, it was generally believed that because of the depth of the quake, most damage, even to historic properties, was relatively isolated. Now that many months have passed, it has become clear with regard to historic and cultural resources that there has been a significant loss of material history as a result of the

Nisqually earthquake. In more than any other terms, the cost of the disaster must be measured in damage to the region's physical heritage, its historic buildings and sites, and the fabric of its oldest downtowns and neighborhoods.

Within a few days of the earthquake, the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), assembled preservationists and architects to plan a comprehensive assessment of damage to historic buildings and sites in the shake area. Eight counties, including a major portion of the population and building stock in the state, were declared a disaster zone by FEMA. Already, serious damage to historic buildings in Seattle's Pioneer Square Historic District was heading news stories about the aftermath of the earthquake. Significant damage to the massive domed State Capitol (Legislative) Building in Olympia provided